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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 004951

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/24/2015

TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM TU AM

SUBJECT: "ALTERNATIVE" ARMENIAN CONFERENCE RESCHEDULED IN ISTANBUL

REF: A. ANKARA 3032

1B. ANKARA 4556

(U) Classified by A/DCM Timothy Betts, E.O. 12958, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) This is a joint AmCon Istanbul/Embassy Ankara message.

12. (C) Summary: A conference at which independent-minded intellectuals will speak about the massacres of Armenians in 1915, canceled in May after Turkish government pressure (ref A), has been rescheduled for September 23-25 in Istanbul. FM Gul accepted organizers' invitation to address the conference but canceled when the dates turned out to conflict with UNGA.

The re-scheduling, which one EU diplomat here called expected but positive, comes at a key time for Turkey's EU accession bid. End Summary.

University Confirms Rescheduling

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13. (C) Congen Istanbul confirmed with Bogazici University History Department Chair Professor Selim Deringil (strictly protect) that the university and other organizers have rescheduled the "Alternative Armenian Conference" for September 23-25 at Bogazici. Chastened by the controversy that erupted in when the conference was first scheduled in May, organizers are circumspect about giving further details, except that the format will remain the same as was originally planned. Press reports indicate that historians who challenge the official GOT position on the events of 1915, including Taner Akcam (author of a monograph on "Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide") and Halil Berkay, remain the featured speakers.

14. (U) Bogazici University had postponed the May conference after Justice Minister and AKP government spokesman Cemil Cicek denounced it as a "stab in the back of the Turkish nation." Despite Cicek's statements, GOT officials insisted that government did not pressure the university to cancel the conference (see, e.g., ref B) and said they hoped the conference would be re-scheduled.

15. (C) In earlier conversations following the May cancellation, organizers rejected government assertions that the program was unbalanced. Murat Belge, head of the Comparative Literature Department at Bilgi University, stressed that the conference's intent was to challenge the prevailing Turkish orthodoxy about the events of 1915. Inviting those who accept that orthodoxy, he argued, would make as little sense as inviting proponents of "creationism" to a conference on problems of evolution.

16. (C) For Bogazici and its relatively new rector, Professor Ayse Soysal, rescheduling the conference offers the opportunity for redemption following the strong criticism they came under for bowing to pressure from the government and postponing the conference. Columnist Ismet Berkan, himself a Bogazici graduate, termed the cancellation a "turning point in terms of academic autonomy and freedom in Turkey." The fact that the conference will remain at Bogazici, rather than a more isolated campus, such as that of co-sponsor Sabanci University, where it was initially rumored to be heading in late May, indicates a clear determination to make amends.

FM Accepts Invitation to Speak, But Schedule Conflict Prevents

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17. (C) Organizers invited FM Gul to make opening remarks at the conference. Gul's cabinet chief told us the FM accepted the invitation "in principle," but had to cancel when the conference dates turned out to overlap with the UNGA. Gul's special assistant added that the FM might attend the last day of the conference but was uncertain whether his schedule could accommodate this. Neither had information on who, if anyone, will address the conference in Gul's stead. Foreign Ministry spokesman Tan later publicly repeated what Gul's staff told us.

18. (C) The decision to invite Gul to open the proceedings highlights an additional issue some Bogazici contacts raised with Congen Istanbul: the problem lay not in the cancellation decision but in the failure to properly lay the groundwork with the government and public opinion. Had this been done,

some believe, the entire fiasco could have been averted.

"Expected, But Positive" News for the EU

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¶9. (C) News of the rescheduling broke on August 22, a key time in Turkey's EU accession process, with COREPER meetings set for August 25 and 31, a Gymnich set for September 1-2, all looking forward to the October 3 opening of accession negotiations. The Danish DCM here told us that news of the rescheduling was "expected, but positive." He predicts that reference to the cancellation will remain in the EU Progress report on Turkey, but will be softened in light of the rescheduling.

¶10. (C) Comment: Compared to May, the GOT and Bogazici are initially handling the event more adroitly. However, we expect nationalist rhetoric to heat up as the conference approaches. End Comment.

MCELDOWNEY